



Twentysomethings

Alexandra Nimetz

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Linoleum block print

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Introduction

At twenty-four, I found myself asking questions. “Am I living the life I want to live or the life I think I should live? What does success mean to me? What are the pressures I feel for myself and my life? Where are they coming from? What will I think in ten years, at thirty-four, if I continue what I’m doing now?”

As I considered these questions, I wondered how other people my age would respond. I also wondered how others were dealing with questions of their own. Instead of just casually conversing with friends, I wanted a more accurate picture of how people my age were living and thinking. I wanted to hear from individuals who were very different from me. I wanted a chance to talk honestly with a varied group of Twentysomethings.

I developed this project as a way of meeting and talking with strangers. I left my corporate job in New York and, for over seven months, drove around the country on my own. I stopped often and introduced myself to strangers. I approached people point blank: on the street, in bars, in stores, in bathrooms, in hotels, at RV parks, at the movies, at the mall, at baseball games. I’d say hi, explain that I’m not a total wacko, give a quick personal history of my motivation for working on this project, then ask if they were willing to be interviewed and photographed. Almost everyone was receptive and made time to talk with me. I tape recorded each discussion, which usually lasted around an hour, and afterwards photographed each subject. Later, I transcribed the interview and edited it by selecting portions of the conversation that best represented each individual.

To date, I’ve visited over forty states and interviewed seventy-eight individuals. My subjects lead varied lives: some live in cities, some in tiny towns, some wear suits to work, some are unemployed, some are divorced, some have children to take care of, some are intensely dedicated to their jobs, some are forever bored, some are disgruntled at the world and at their existence, some have God to thank for everything.

While this project was fueled by the questions I was asking myself, it was also a way of talking with a set of individuals chosen almost at random whom I would otherwise never get a chance to know. It was a way for me to have meaningful interactions with strangers, most of whom, like me and many other Twentysomethings, were also questioning and searching and still figuring themselves out.

Jackson

I really like reptiles. I still may go back to graduate school. Probably not for a good 'nother five or six years but I might go back for herpetology which is the study of snakes and reptiles. Hopefully by then I'll have a few connections. Next winter I think I'm going to New Zealand to raft for the winter and there's a lot of reptiles in New Zealand and Australia and whatnot so I might not come back. I'm going to buy a one-way ticket and see how it goes from there.

As long as I can eat and have enough money where I'm not completely poor then I'm fine. To me success is getting up every morning and saying, "I get to go to work today. This is what I get to do today." I worked seven days a week all summer long. I had maybe three days off in four months and I didn't mind at all. Every morning I would get up, whether I was tired or not tired or hung over, and the first thing I would do was jump in the river and the river's like forty degrees in May and April and, you know, that's the best thing to do. Get up and say, "I get to go to work today." You know, I didn't make a whole lot of money but, like I said, that doesn't really matter. I enjoy what I do every single day, day in and day out.



Jackson, 24
Salida, Colorado
Grew up: Northwood, Iowa

Tiymeako

We planned our first. We were only seventeen but you know how when you're seventeen years old and your mom and dad don't know what you're doing and you're just out there. It was one of those Sally Jesse Raphael shows when I'm crying to have a baby and then when I get a baby I'm crying that I don't want a baby...I guess 'cause I was seeing all of the girls around me having babies and I just looked at that and thought it was so easy - I could have a baby and I could have my man...He's the father of my two boys but my little girl, I was raped by her father.

One night I came home - it was like four-thirty in the morning. It was still dark outside. I had just worked the midnight shift. The only thing I remember was cutting the light on, seeing him sitting there in the dark and him on top of me. And I could still smell the scent on his breath that he had been drinking. He had choked me unconscious and later on that day when I regained my consciousness it was like two o'clock...and he told me he did it because he felt like he was losing me and just trying to make me feel like it was my fault...I was working at Circle K and he just thought I was like flirting with my customers or something like that. And I did feel like it was my fault because I smiled at my customers and I talked to my customers. I'm a people person and I talk with anyone whether it be male, female - it could be a Martian - I don't care.

I stayed with him for another month after that and every time it would be the same thing. One day he was sitting there looking at TV and something happened and he just slapped me up off the couch and, I mean, I flew off the couch to the other side. He slapped me - he backhanded me - so hard that I flew over the arm of the couch onto the floor and I just jumped up and starting fighting him back.



Tiymeako, 23
Mobile, Alabama

Scratch

I woke up on the bathroom floor with a needle in my arm and instead of trying to recuperate I fixed up another shot. And that was the last time I did it because I knew if I kept doing it I would die. 'Cause I'm pretty sure I probably was dead for just a minute when it happened. It was a big shot too. I woke up and fixed up another one and then the next day I came here. A guy from here drove down to Birmingham and picked me up. I stayed at my parents' house and rode it out. It was really fucking awful. I'm glad I did it that way instead of a hospital. They give you pills to help you through it but I'd rather do it the hard way. You won't want to have to go through it again. I think that's one of the reasons which really helps me stay away from that shit now.

I'm tired of being sick. It's a ridiculous way to live. You reach a point where you'll steal from your friends and that's no way to live...I was actually considering going to school to become a drug counselor and work with teens. You know, impact someone's life and change it for the better. I wish I'd had someone like that. Instead I hung out with older people who thought it was funny to get the twelve year-old kid drunk on whisky. By the time I was fourteen I'd already been doing PCP and smoking pot on a daily basis. It's just ridiculous. Most people I came up with are either dead or in prison so I'm actually glad I quit hanging out with them.



Scratch, 27
Lexington, Kentucky

Tom

It just bothers me if there's someone out there who doesn't like me, you know...I'll lie - I've had the habit in the past. I'm just such a pussy - wanting people to be happy - I will do anything - I will avoid - I'll lie to keep them happy. I guess it's not to deal with confrontation, like, the perfect example, in college, the first couple years, I would do the most evil things. This is the worst one ever. I was seeing this girl and I didn't want to see her anymore and I didn't have the balls just to be a man and call her so I call her - this is horrible, you're going to hate me - I was drunk keep in mind and she's like, "What happened? I haven't talked with you in so long. I left those messages and you never called me." And I'm like, "Oh yeah, my dad passed away." I've always felt horrible about this. This is not something I do on a regular basis. This is the worst by far but it came out of my mouth. It just kind of came out.

But the point of the story - I do that bullshit. It's not right. It's wronging others because I don't want to deal with anything hard. I was talking with my brother and he's like, "Dude, you just kind of avoid anything that's difficult - or interpersonally difficult for you." And it's not really fair to the other person and it makes me feel really shitty. It's kind of another thing that would make me happier - something I need to work on - feeling good about other people's feelings. I'm not really conscious about that. I put things off without telling people what I really want, especially girls.



Tom, 25
Ketchum, Idaho
Grew up: Los Angeles, California

Jonathan

I'm pretty pissed off at God. You go to church and hear about how God put his sons through this and that and I'm thinking to myself how could God put someone in a situation where he feels pain most of the time? A lot of people will go, "Well, what do you think your situation would have been in Korea?" Well, I'll never know but it sure as hell wouldn't be like this I can tell you that. I would be with people who would understand who I am. Would I be a criminal? Maybe. Would I be successful? Maybe. I'll never know. I'm in this situation right now and I'm pretty pissed. I'd rather be a poor kid on the street instead of being stuck in this situation.

Living in this town if you're the only Asian person (which I'm not the only Asian but there's only like four or five of us) there's pressure, you know, putting your foot into this town. It's how you put your foot into the door and try to get into the door and not allow them to slam it closed. I've talked with a lot of other Asians and they feel isolation. And when you're adopted, you don't get a chance to meet other people like that. It's double the burden. You never know who your parents were and then you're adopted and you go to a different region and you're the minority.

I went to Toronto and it's so weird because most of my friends are white - actually all my friends are white - and we were in the subway and it's like we're on this side and all the Asians were on the other side looking at me. 'Cause my mannerisms are all white. I don't speak my language. I have no connection. I was raised white. It just felt kind of uncomfortable - like I was stuck in the middle - and I'm kind of sad by that because Asians are also very judgmental. They would rather have you be Asian than white even if you were adopted. So ignorance is all over us. It doesn't matter what race you are.



Jonathan, 27
Luddington, Michigan
Born in Korea and adopted at four years old.

Sandra

I've been in a nine year relationship and I decided to end it. When I met him I was nineteen and I was a different person then. He's a lot older than I am - he's forty-six - and when I met him, looking back in hindsight, I realize that I needed a father figure. I didn't know what I wanted when I was nineteen and I feel like I've been so involved in this relationship for so long. Up until a week ago I felt like a fortysomething trapped in a twentysomething body...I didn't know I was young until recently. A couple people had to point it out to me. I didn't know that I could do things myself. I mean, I supported him financially but he took care of the laundry, the dishes, all that stuff. And I could do those things but I didn't have the time.

I'm really looking forward to this new chapter whatever it may be. I seem to be accepting the unknown of the future a lot more. Now it's just my future. It's not our future. He has his dreams and goals as a starving artist and I've been waiting and waiting and waiting and it's not my dream. My dreams when I was with him were for him to accomplish his goals so that we could get financially okay in order to get married and have kids and so I could go to school eventually. What changed is I realize that I don't need someone else. I don't need to wait for someone else to achieve their goals in order to achieve mine.



Sandra, 28
Santa Fe, New Mexico
Grew up: Rutland, Massachusetts

Chuck

When I was younger my parents were always like, "Go to college. You got to go to college. You got to do this. You got to do that." And I was like, "Well, I don't want to do that." I like having fun - skiing's fun - that's why I do it and I guess it makes me feel good about myself knowing that I skied a hard line and you look back at it and it's just like, "Damn, that was tough and I did it." And then sometimes not. Sometimes failing and falling, getting back up again, trying it again. I don't know, it just makes me feel good inside. I can't really explain it to you.

Everyday people come up here. They don't know anything about skis. They're like, "What are these thin shaped skis?" I'm thinking, "Wow, I've known this my whole life." I could look at a pair of skis, pretty much, and tell you what year they were made, you know, the boots, everything, the equipment, even snow pants. It's just, I don't know, I can't picture my life not being in New Hampshire in these mountains, near any mountains. If I lived anyplace it would have to be in the mountains. I like hiking and just sitting on top of a mountain, just looking out and your head's just so clear. You're just almost in awe when you look at the view. That's what I dig, just a certain calmness you get. Yeah, it's a good feeling. No people around, you know. Nobody to stress you out or anything like that. Just you - maybe a couple of your good buddies.



Chuck, 29
Intervale, New Hampshire

Laura

I grew up in poverty. My mom was on food stamps for a good majority of my youth and we never had a car that was newer than ten years. We lived on forty acres and we could never do anything with the land because we didn't have any money. It was always tense. You never knew what was going to happen the next day and I want to know what's going to come tomorrow. I want to know I'm going to have enough food on the table or I'm going to have enough money for rent.

I've never taken a boyfriend home to meet my mom - well, since college anyway - because part of me is ashamed of the place she lives. She lives in a 10 by 50 trailer with a little add on and it's so old. It was made in the 1960's and the floors are falling out and it's probably not what you want to find at the other end of the rainbow...[I worry] that they would reject me because of financial reasons. That they would think that, "Oh wow, the family doesn't have money and so they're lazy." Or, "She's going to grow up to be poor." Or for them to not want to stay there. I think that would be horrible because in a way I don't feel like that's me. Part of it's me but not all of it.

I think that when you try to talk with people they're really receptive and in the back of their minds they're like, "Wow, what a loser." I just think that a lot of people are more comfortable with who they are than I am. I'm still trying to figure out who I am.



Laura, 23
Jackson, Wyoming

Jamie

November of 2000 I found out I had cancer. I was twenty-six and the doctor was like, "You have cancer." It's in remission right now but I'm still kind of recovering from it - my body's still recovering. I did eight months of chemo and then six weeks of radiation. The biggest mass was in my chest and that's why I was tired all the time. It was about the size of my fist, the mass. It's hard to really pinpoint how big it is now but they think it's scar tissue at this point.

You know, I was really lucky. The treatments went pretty smoothly. You know, I didn't really miss work. [I took off] two weeks after the day I was out of work because I was having tests and I had to take off every other Friday for chemo treatments but other than that I didn't miss work because I didn't feel well.

I was very lucky to have a strong support group around me - great family, great friends, my office was very supportive - and I think the reason I was able to keep a positive attitude was because I didn't say, "Why me?" I didn't have something to dwell on. You don't really try to think of it like that because there's not an answer. I try to focus on what I have to do to make it better, you know. I never really thought, "Okay, what if I die?" I never thought I was going to die.



Jamie, 27
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandra

I've been a goody two-shoes, like honor classes, straight A's, things of that nature so there are pretty high expectations. And there are some days that I really don't know if I like what I'm doing but I don't know what else I could do, you know, to support myself.

I feel very independent and that's one of the things I strive for is being independent, not depending on my boyfriend or my family. I haven't asked for anything from my parents since I left high school. I haven't asked them to support me financially or anything of that nature. I try to be very independent and do what I want to do when I want to do it but I don't really take the time to enjoy what I'm doing right now. I'm always worried about what I have to do next to make sure that this is okay five years from now, ten years from now and so on. That's the goal but I know, realistically, that probably will never happen because there's always more you can have. So I think once I reach a certain level I will want more and I'll keep striving for that. I'm never really happy. People have told me that before. You can't really satisfy me. It's never good enough. I keep pushing myself. I really am pretty hard on myself.



Sandra, 24
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Jaime

I'm a big Christian. I believe in God fully. That's what gets me through. I mean, sometimes I know I stray away. I say a bad word or do something but I always go back to God. I always pray to him before I go to bed every night. I talk to him during the day. He's what gets me through everything. He's the one that's there for me every time. If I don't have anybody I have him and I know that. He's what's going to be there 'til I die and every day when I die.

Like sometimes I need concentration or I need determination to do well and I'll say, "God, send me some determination to do this," and I'll pray and then I'll be like, "You know, I can do this." He just gives me the peace to be able to do what I need to do to get done instead of procrastinate. And when I travel I haven't had a wreck. He saves me. When I'm with my friends and they say, "Do this!" and I'm like, "No." He's with me and he's there telling me, you know, "You don't need to do this." He's always there with me to help me do the things I'm supposed to. I think that's what's going to get me through, you know, without it I don't think I could function...I feel like if I didn't have him in my life I would not know where to go. I wouldn't have a head on my shoulders. I'd be like wandering around wondering, "What should I do?"



Jaime, 21
Arkadelphia, Arkansas

Syd

Past life regression was interesting. The first past life I see I was a Roman soldier...I found out that I'd also been a concert violinist and...it's kind of ironic because I'll tell you something else...[in another] past life my whole family was killed in a concentration camp. I was a Jew...[and in high school] I got into the gang thing and, I'll be honest with you, I got into the neo-Nazi, skinhead thing and I couldn't understand why I was so interested in that. I mean, I was hardcore Baptist. I was Sergeant at Arms for a Southside Chapter. I was very, very high up. And I got thinking about it, you know, when I went into the military and my best friend was a black guy and I realized it was all bullshit.

It's stupid because usually the people who are in charge of those gangs are uneducated. They want to lash out. They're angry about something because they're not content with themselves and they are gifted with leadership - God knows why - because the leader of our group never made it out of eighth grade. He could barely write his name but he was a leader. He's someone you looked up to. At that time in my life I felt like I didn't have a lot of friends. These guys took me in. If I needed money, they gave it to me. If I needed clothing, they gave it to me. If I ever had a problem or I needed something or I needed someone to talk to, they were there. Their house was like my house. I mean, I had a key to this guy's house. It's a family and at that time I really didn't have too much of a family in my home.



Syd, 22
Lexington, Kentucky
Grew up: Jackson City, Florida

Jeffrey

Success to me is when you accomplish everything - all your goals that you have set for yourself...to have my own place, my own car, you know, be stable where I live comfortably. Basically that's it. Really live a day-to-day life...I mean, I plan to have a nice family. You know, a house. You know, the basic life. I plan to have that life.

I feel like I have everything I want right now: no loans, I have somewhere to stay - a place of my own, transportation, food, a refrigerator...I mean, I'd rather work for myself than work for someone else - have people work for me. I know it's a bit more stressful if you're running something - have your own thing - but you calling the shots so...[But] no one really loves their job, you know, I mean, unless they're an executive and way up there - top of the list. I really don't think nobody really loves their job.



Jeffrey, 24
Dallas, Texas

Lauren

I think what happened was I thought the break from high school to college was you had to be an adult and know absolutely everything and be perfect at it and be completely self-sufficient and never ask for help. And when I got there I think what happened was my body started to shut down and I started acting out behaviors that were trying to bring me back and ask for help even though I couldn't verbalize it. I called [my parents] from college and I said, "You know, I'm not sure what I'm doing but I'm losing my vision and I can barely stand without falling down and I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack walking up the stairs."

I'm most scared of becoming an adult, the thing I thought I could handle. And I think it could be my idea of an adult - a perfect being who can handle everything. I think once I learn to deconstruct that idea it will be easier for me to move on because every time I start to get well - you know, stop using my eating disorder behavior and things like that that make me isolate - I have to sabotage myself because I think I'm getting to a level that I can't handle. In reality I'm sure I can handle it but the fear is great enough for me to discount everything I've built.

That's the thing with my whole mindset and approach towards life. I think I'm always going to be saying, "Wait 'til I'm the best adult." And I'll be forty years old if I go on this route and saying, "Oh, I'm not there yet. I'm not there yet." I mean, I've lived in probably seven different states in the past three years and moved eight times this past year. It's totally the definition of insanity where I keep doing the same thing over and over expecting different results, thinking that every time I move things are going to be different - but, whoops, I brought myself along.

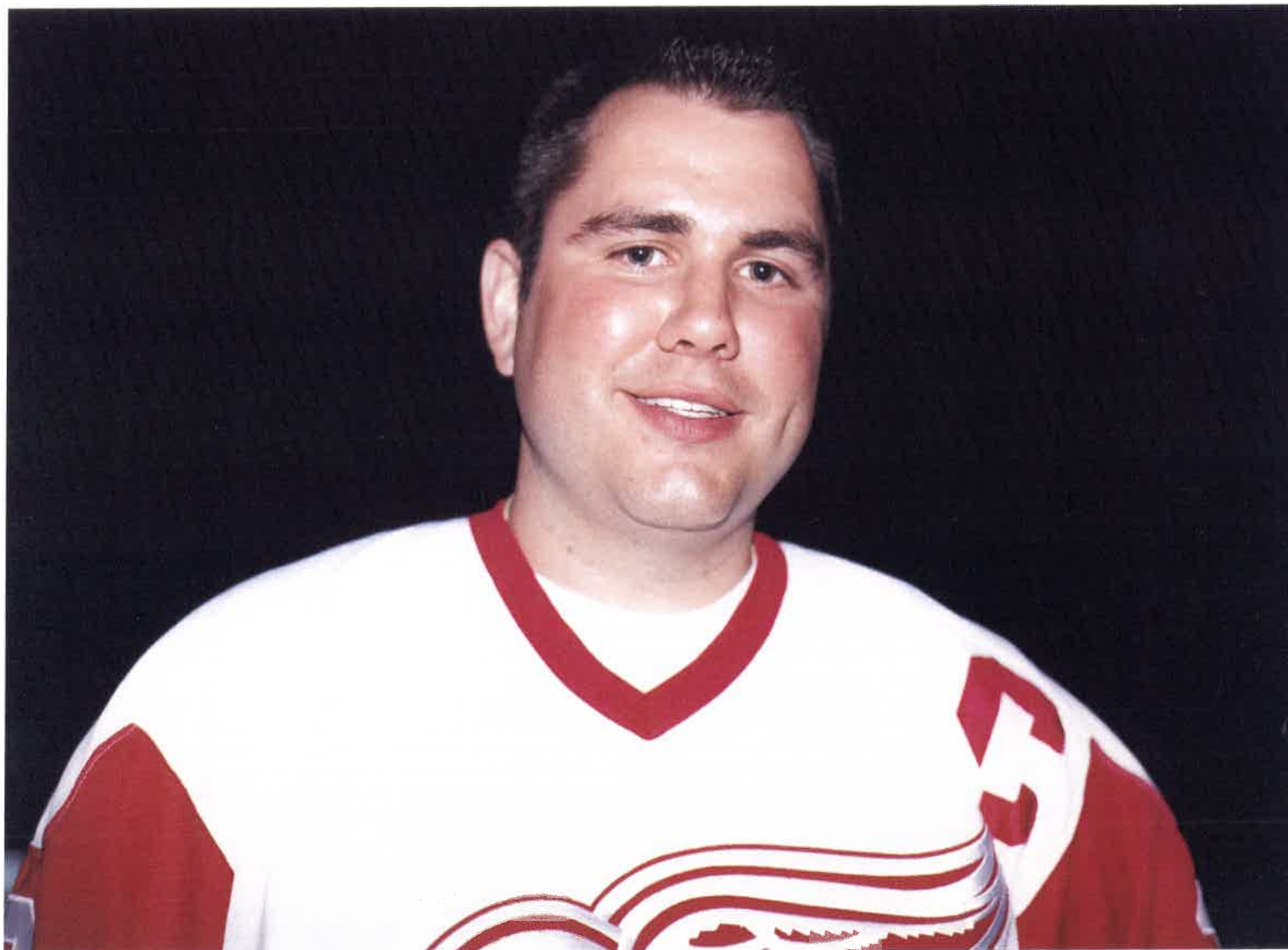


Lauren, 24
Living temporarily: Sun Valley, Idaho
Grew up: Marin County, California

Brian

I make great money. I love to travel. I have a great house out in the suburbs and I drive a nice car. I have all the perks but just missing that other someone. I'm satisfied but I'm not there yet. My biggest thing is meeting that special somebody. If I could find the right lady who would like to travel with me it would be a blast but it's not happening.

I think my biggest problem, which I've known for the last couple months, is I'm trying to meet women in bars and I know that that's not the place to meet women. 'Cause I look and, I mean, I'm pretty picky. Not so much looks-wise but there's certain things that have to be there and you can't find it in a bar - at least I haven't found it yet. Then you look at, well, how do you meet women outside a bar? People say, "friends" but none of my friends' girlfriends have friends. I guess they've been in a relationship so long. I even tried the internet thing. I hear about it and I hear about people meeting people in the grocery store but it just hasn't happened to me. I mean, I'm kind of shy when it comes to a girl in the grocery store, you know, how do you approach them? Sometimes I can be real shy. Sometimes - liquid courage. If I have a buzz I can walk up to anybody. I guess I need more confidence just to see you in a supermarket and walk up and say hi.



Brian, 27
St. Clair Shores, Michigan

Ricardo

I didn't discover myself until not so long ago. It's kind of weird. It's actually kind of easy to talk about this now because I don't know you - I just met you - so it's very impersonal in a way. I was sexually abused when I was a little kid until I was twelve. So I had a lot of problems dealing with masculinity - like my sexual identity and the reasons that it happened and my family. In a way, the reason I left my country is because of that. I kind of wanted to be away from that - to escape.

Until not too long ago I didn't even know what my problem was. You know, there are a lot of things that go to - especially growing up in a religious - and I'm not against religion, I don't know, and I shouldn't say this because I don't want to piss anybody off but I am bisexual and I think most of that probably has to do with the fact that I was abused for a long time. I understand that your body gets used to it, especially starting as young as it did for me. I think that's a big reason. And for a long time I thought I was a bad person because of that. I grew up going to a Catholic school, was Mormon for a while and "Gosh, you were going to go to hell." And what I finally realize - I cannot change the organic part, the physiological part. There's no way. And then I realized, "Well, if I can't change this I might as well change my head." And I changed the way I look at this and I've been much happier since then. That was last year.



Ricardo, 24
Logan, Utah
Grew up: Brazil

Alexis

I can't remember a time when I wasn't going to be an artist. I definitely had some confliction over it, like, what I wanted to do specifically because I felt like my future was kind of prearranged for me. Well, my mom's an artist, her father was an artist, his father was an artist. So I was given a talent and I wasn't sure if I wanted it. I'm still kind of coming to resolution over it because I definitely have some aspects of it that I don't really enjoy. I don't enjoy all the time locking myself in the studio for hours by myself.

I just paint because I enjoy it and, honestly, I'm not good at anything else. I enjoy lots of other things but everything takes me twice as long to learn as everybody else and I'm good at painting. Why not paint if I'm good at it and I enjoy it? It's selfish. I think it's a really selfish thing, painting. Yeah, 'cause I paint for me and as soon as I think that I'm painting for somebody else I get very mad and don't do it. I think a lot of times that I rejected this role as an artist because I thought I was painting for other people. So that made me really mad because I felt like everybody else was controlling everything like, "Here's this talent and you have to do it for us."



Alexis, 20
Durham, New Hampshire

Richie

I was bad in school and, to be honest, I barely graduated - not because of my grades but because of my actions. I was bad in stuff. I did a lot of smarting off and fighting. The things I did in school that got me in trouble, I regret doing them. Like being mean to people that weren't right - like people that had, not physical, but other kinds of handicaps - when I was younger, I was mean to them. Now I'm not and I regret ever having being mean to them...Yeah, but I don't think that I act good like a person that goes to church would act. I don't think I'm living up to the standards of a person in church - like the way you would expect a person that goes to church to act. I don't think I'm that way because I like to leave church at church and do whatever I want after I leave. Most people that go to church aren't that way. They live up to the standards of the church - church actions - even when they're not there.

The best chance that I have of getting out of Hot Springs is right now and that's what I want to do. My parents have some friends who live in South Carolina and they're supposed to be coming up in November and if everything goes right I'll be able to go with them. But I don't want to go and not have any money and right now I'm looking for a job and there's not many of those around here that are open. I worked at the racetrack in what they call maintenance but basically it was like housekeeping - cleaning up after the people left and stuff. I liked that job the best. It was easy and it was good pay for being that easy. I liked that. Anything before that or after that I didn't really care about.



Richie, 20
Hot Springs, Arkansas

Jenny

My parents really didn't approve of me marrying my husband because he didn't have the career to take care of me and he just doesn't really have any aspiration to take and do anything. So a lot of the time I feel like it's on my shoulders. Or, you know, there's certain relatives that, since you don't have some great, glamorous job, kind of brush you off. My husband's older brother has a Ph.D. in psychology and we never hear from them just because we don't live the same lifestyle.

I guess I'd hate to go on living my life trying to prove people wrong by maybe that's part of it. I want to take and prove to people that put me down or said, "You're never going to do this. You're never going to amount to anything." You know, a lot of people said, "Oh, your marriage is a joke. It's never going to last." Well, going five years strong now thank you very much. Maybe it's not either of my husband's brothers' opinion of what a marriage should be because we work back-to-back shifts a lot of times to take and work around, you know, having to pay for daycare but, I guess besides that, I always feel like I have something to take and prove to myself, if not someone else, and I guess that's what keeps me going too.



Jenny, 23
Green Bay, Wisconsin

Julio

During the past four years I've lost five people I love very dearly. And we lost my father, my aunt and my sister in a period of one year and it was also a period of time when I wanted to live my adolescent life and do what I wanted to do. But I was forced into becoming an adult and taking care of all the stuff my father used to take care of...After he passed away a lot of the family members were lecturing to me and they're all, "Well, your father's not here. You have your grandmother to take care of, you have your mother, you have your sister. These are the woman you have to take care of." And I was like, "I don't want to do this." But it was basically pushed onto me to do. It's the role of a Pueblo man - especially from Taos - to take care of his family and if you are the oldest son then it is your role to step in for whomever you lost.

I was put in this position basically having to deal with this stuff through religion as well as on a daily basis - say, fieldwork. We own horses so I had to also take care of our livestock. I was just like, "Oh, I don't want to deal with this. I don't want to deal with nothing that my father had to do." But after a while I started thinking about it and I was like, "I have to do this because if I don't, no one else is going to do it for me." It was a big step for me and this January 18th is going to be his third year gone and I've been starting to do a lot of stuff on my own.



Julio, 24
Taos, New Mexico

Jenny

Okay, first off, my dad and I are best friends. And usually it's the mom and the daughter - my mom and I, we're friends now but we weren't when I was growing up. So my dad and I were best friends and we'd go outside, we'd haul wood together, we'd throw logs at each other just, you know, for fun stuff. And he got me into snowmobiling. And then when I was thirteen he said, "Do you want to learn how to hunt? Let's go out." So we went outside and he shot a bebe gun with me. I was like, "Oh, gun. Cool."

My folks divorced two years ago and it's just not forever, you know what I mean. So I figure I'll be bumping from boyfriend to boyfriend when I'm eighty still. I like to do stuff and go and I haven't found a guy that keeps up with that, you know what I mean. My last relationship was three years ago and I haven't had any desire to be in another one since.

I'm not looking for stable. To be quite honest, stable is boring. I'd rather pick one state each year and go live there for a year and then hop-scotch across the country. I will probably never have a retirement because right now I get bored of where I am on an average of one to two years...But my life keeps getting better and better. Today's better than yesterday and, I don't know, it just keeps getting better. Whereas, I hear a lot of people, "God, it was so good in high school." I'm just like, "High school sucked man compared to where I am now."



Jenny, 25
Cheboygan, Michigan

Johnny

I'm a non-assertive kind of guy - lackluster - don't put a lot of effort into things, pretty damn lazy. I mean, I have jobs, whatever. I bust my ass cooking - I'm definitely a ninja in the kitchen - always moving. I get into the groove, into the mindset when that's what you're doing and you just do the best you can. Or the best you can to look a little better than people and then not get fired - just a little bit - don't want to push it too much because then they'll start giving you more money and you'll have to do more work - screw that.

When you have to break up your life to go to work then everything else is just going to fucking die on you. You have to spend at least 40 hours to 80 hours a week doing the things you love and you can't, unless you have money. If you want to paint, you can't sit at home and paint pictures like a little kid - you can't do that. You have to go to work and then you get home and your day's gone and you're so tired and you just don't want to do anything - just have a beer and just numb yourself in front of the cathode ray and become a glossy-eyed drooling zombie. Maybe that's what I regret the most is turning into one of those guys just because of fucking work.

I've just been so lost, you know. I don't know, just got to get out of here. I don't know, it's cliché, "find yourself again." Just - my heart's not into a lot of things in my life - just not there, pretty vacant. I usually don't like myself all that much. I just feel kind of like a failure. Kind of like a loser. That's about it.



Johnny, 29
Portland, Maine

Larissa

There are those times when you're lying in bed trying to fall asleep when your mind starts racing and I sometimes get nervous because I feel like there's a lot that I'm not addressing or being aggressive enough in terms of pursuing my dreams. I can see myself being lazy and I have a tendency towards laziness. You know, I get comfortable with what I'm doing. I was able to stay in finance for three years - it was nothing. So sometimes I get down on myself for not being more aggressive and pursuing my dreams.

I sit and picture myself going on the subway, taking the same commute for the rest of my life and it makes me ill. I can't even imagine that being it for the rest of my life. It's really scary or at least it's scary for me to make such a big move, especially more now with the market being so crappy. I don't like making big life decisions. I'm a creature of comfort and habit but if I don't try this now I can see myself wondering, "What if?" [Biology and working with animals] has been my dream since I was little. You know, I used to collect caterpillars and watch anthills and how could I go through life without ever trying it? It's going to be hard but how could I not give it a shot?

And I think I stress out too - I think this is more with women - because I do want to have a family eventually and I feel like every life decision that a woman makes might be bigger than our male contemporaries. Because my guy friends, if they decide they want to try some new career or go out West or even go to study zebra in the bush, that's cool, they can father a kid - look at Anthony Quinn, he was like eighty and fathered a kid - but we have a window. So, I mean, that really narrows the window of the experimental/pursuing your dreams type phase. Our decisions weigh more in terms of our future life and that's a pressure. And I'm not one that wants to get married right away and start my family now but I want to do it before I'm in my mid-thirties. It makes your decisions now more important or you have to choose them a little more carefully than, say, your guy friends now.



Larissa, 25
New York, New York

Dima

Okay, it's an old idea but happiness is just - how do you say - you cannot be happy. You can be happy only for a second and you can be happy for any sort of thing, any little thing which has nothing to do with real success or anything. Do you know Bertrand Russell the very famous logician? Anyway, he was a mathematician and he told that talented people are indifferent to happiness. Actually, he mentioned not ordinary people - not ordinary people are indifferent to happiness, especially to somebody else's happiness. You can be unhappy for a long, long time but you can be happy only for a moment. I can be happy for a second. That's it. He can be pleased, he can be in a very good mood but it's just a moment that you think you're happy. The next moment that's gone.

Remember as a child you dream about this toy and you think, "If I get this toy I'll be so happy that I don't need anything more." And you get this toy - next day you don't care about it. I mean, you care about it but you don't think that you are happy because of this toy. Basically, the whole life is like this.



Dima, 24
Denver, Colorado
Grew up: Moscow, Russia

Dana

I've been on the road since I was seventeen. If I'm trying to get somewhere I'm usually either hitching or trying to get on a freight train but, if I'm already in a town where I want to be, I pretty much just hang out with my friends and, pretty much, I drink a lot.

[My parents and I] get along pretty well. I mean, they helped me get out of jail in Virginia once. I was drinking a beer behind the 7-Eleven and this cop comes up - it's like an undercover cop, right - and the guy pulls out a badge and he's taking our beer and I was like nineteen at the time. He gives me a minor in possession ticket and he's trying to search me and I told him he needs to get female officer and he's like, "Well we don't have any so I'm going to have to search you." So I elbowed him really hard and I spit on his pants and they charged me with assault and battery on a police officer. I've been to jail a bunch of times and usually it's for a couple days and then they let you out and they tell you to leave town but they were talking about sending me to prison so, yeah, then I called my parents and had them get me a lawyer.

I'm really not so [angry] as I was a couple years ago. Like, I spent all of this winter in jail - it was a one year sentence - and I think I'm a lot more thoughtful of a person. I'm not glad I went to jail but actually there are much worse situations to be in than jail. Jail really isn't that bad compared to, like, going out with my ex-boyfriend. I'd rather be in jail than going out with my ex-boyfriend just 'cause he was really annoying.



Dana, 21

Considers Ann Arbor, Michigan home.
Grew up: Morristown, New Jersey

Ali

Especially in the South, if you're from a different country, they look at you like you're from a different world. To be honest - don't take it as an offense or something - there's a lot of racism over here in the South. I mean, if I'm talking to a girl, the first impression she would get is I'm from a different country. That I'm a Muslim - second thing. That's the biggest threat to the United States but that's not a problem - we are not enemies, stuff like that comes up. I mean, I work at Outback Steakhouse and the treatment I get there is kind of different from other people. Like, they'll intermingle with each other, you know, talk with each other, but I feel out of the way or a separate being from them even though I work with them. Yesterday they were making plans to play cards and I was like, "Hey, can I come too?" They were totally speechless. They just ignored me. I was like, "Okay, I got the answer. Maybe I'm not invited. Okay, cool, no problem." I just back off. I don't say anything to anybody because, the thing is, if I say anything, that would be an offense or something.

So I kind of feel angry because I speak your language. I'm trying to communicate with you. People see you differently if you're from a different nation. They would prefer staying with their own kind. I mean, I don't create any differences, why should you? That's the question I want to ask the Southerners. Why do you create so much difference? I mean, we are humans. We have the same feelings as you guys. Why do you create difference? They look at us like we're going to do something really stupid or we're going to ask you to do something for us.



Ali, 23
Mobile, Alabama
Moved from Pakistan four years ago.

Nick

When I lived in Argentina, at the end of my stay, I was teetering between several things: I didn't know if I wanted to stay in the States and go to law school, I didn't know if I wanted to go into neuroscience or I didn't know if I wanted to travel more. And the cousin of the woman I lived with said - in Spanish he told me - it's a quote from, like, the greatest Argentine author ever, Borges, "Some people search to find and some people search to search." He told me as advice, "I think you're searching to search. I think if you go travel more right now you're just going to be doing the same thing that you did here and then you're going to want more and you're not going to find it and you're going to go do it again." He's like, "You don't have a thing that you're looking for. You're just searching." And he's probably right.

So that's why I came back. I want to do this while I can. I don't want to be going to school when I'm thirty or forty and I do want to do this but I'm not making any promises to myself or to anyone at the University or to anyone in the field that I'll be in this field in five years when I graduate. I may very well get the degree and go bartend. I love that lifestyle. [But] when you're bartending for six months you realize that the stimulation of your brain goes down so much and you start to miss that and you say, you know, "I'm not challenged." And then you get back into it and you start taking med school classes and stuff like that and you miss drinking seven nights a week with your friends and throwing darts. So you can't have it all. But that's why I like change because you can't have it all at once but you can have it all in cycles. You can't have everything at once but you can have everything at some point. You can have something at some time and something else at a different time. I mean, the only constant I ever really want is change. I want to always keep changing and I want everything around me to always keep changing.



Nick, 24
Indianapolis, Indiana
Grew up: Houston, Texas

Jen

I'm having a little anxiety right now 'cause I just turned twenty-five on Sunday and I had a complete breakdown. I went downstairs and my dad was like, "Happy Birthday!" and I burst into tears. I'm living at home right now for a couple months to save some money [but] I feel like I've lived at home for like a year. I keep trying to positive about it but I'm like, "I'm such a loser. I'm living at home. I don't go out. I have no career." And my parents are like, "Why don't you turn it around and think of all the positives? You do have a job. You do have friends. You're saving money. You're only twenty-five!" When they're saying, "You're only twenty-five," I'm like, "I'm thirty!"

And I can't for some reason get out of that mindset 'cause I have this mentality - I think when I was eighteen or when I turned twenty or something I had a plan in my head, "Okay, so by the time I'm twenty-four I'll be engaged and then I'll be married when I'm twenty-five. I'll have a baby when I'm twenty-five or twenty-six. Then I'll have another baby..." and I'm twenty-five and I should already have a ring on my finger and a baby in my arms and what am I doing? I'm living at home and there's no ring, no boyfriend, no nothing and I don't have a clue. So I'm freaking 'cause I have no idea what I'm doing.

I mean, I like my life but I just don't like not knowing. I like to plan things out and right now I'm kind of coping with no plan. I almost wish that it were ten years from now and I could look back and be like, "Ha, ha, ha, remember when I was twenty-five and I was so worried about my life and where I was going." But you don't know. I mean, on one hand you can look at it like, "Oh, it's so exciting." And some people do - some people love surprise, love not knowing what the next day is going to bring - but it makes me so anxious.



Jen, 25
Boston, Massachusetts

Mike

My dad raised me to be book smart. "You go to college. You get yourself an education. That's what you do in life because I didn't do that. I had to work for a living." He wanted to give me a pencil pusher job - I don't know what they call it anymore - a white collar job. And I went out and I did that and I came back from Hawaii and I was subbing in this area and I didn't like it. So for the summer I didn't have a good summer job. I was working at the mall during the day and working as a waiter at night and they cut my hours at the mall so I was going in like two days a week on the weekends. And Dad goes, "Well listen, if you don't have anything to do, I need some help. I'm busy, really busy." So June or July I'd come up [to the garage] like three days a week and one day I walked in the door at like nine o'clock and he goes, "Do you want to make \$200 today?" Like who the hell wouldn't?

My current girlfriend has trouble with it. Every now and then I didn't scrape all the dirt under my nails off and that's "icky." People in this area have trouble with it because you go off to college, you get this degree and then you're worth a million bucks or something like that. You and I know it's a different story. But, yeah, I'm supposed to be smart and this is supposed to be a stupid-ass business getting your hands dirty and breaking your back. I think it's business and business is business. It's not a fairy tale world that people want it to be. I don't know how you feel but all the sitcoms I watched growing up lie because life isn't solved in twenty-two minutes with a nice chunk of commercials in the middle.



Mike, 27
Milton, Pennsylvania

Christina

I haven't measured up to, for example, the religious beliefs. I have strong religious beliefs. I'm a strong Catholic but I lost a lot of the morals that I had. I went against a lot of stuff and that was hard for me to forgive myself for. There's some stuff that I don't think I can ever forgive myself for. And me being a religious person, thinking, "Will God ever forgive me for that?" And I get scared, "No, I don't know if he will or not." That plays a big part in my life. I pray a lot now - more than I ever had - because I feel that I failed at so much that I'm trying to make up for it now.

I'm starting to have less time that I can almost use my youth as an excuse - "I'm just being a twenty-year-old kid, not a big deal." I'm getting too old for that. The excuses are going away. There's no more excuses. That means it's time for me to buckle my ass down and do what I have to do to make my life the way I want it. Not do it because I have to, you know. Not do it because that's what most twenty-year olds are supposed to do. Like going to school - if I go to school, I'll get a good job and I'll be able to support myself for the rest of my life and that's what I want to do. Whereas, you know, back in Rhode Island, I'd say, "Yeah, I can go to school or I can go out and party and get really drunk and not really worry about it. I still have plenty of time to make it up." Now I'm having less time to make it up now.



Christina, 20
Boise, Idaho
Recently moved from Rhode Island where she grew up.

Vern

If you work hard enough you will get what you deserve and, you know, you lounge around, you don't get it. In the Philippines, once you're in the age where you're old enough to do things for yourself, you start doing it and doing it for others. And you help out your elders. In my kind of background - not my white background but my Filipino background - is that we work hard for everything. And if you look at some of the other Asian backgrounds or any other Hispanic background, you'll see 'em working hard just for probably minimum wage so that they can live and do - and they're proud of it. That's how I was brought up - is that you take everything - your job - you do it a hundred percent or you don't do it at all.

Everything that I own here is mine...I'm not going to brag but I bought two vehicles and I've given one to my cousin so that he could have one to drive when he turned sixteen. Who have you seen who done that when they're twenty-four years old? Not a lot of people.

I'm ready to get my land, you know...It's like probably every person that's been out on a farm or a ranch - that's what they want - area where they can raise their cattle and, you know, have a big, decent family. [I want] about a hundred acres or so. I'm not a city person. I've lived in a city because of school. I want to hear nothing. I don't want to hear cars driving by or anything like that. I want to hear dogs barking. I don't hear that. My apartment complex, you can have dogs but little, bitty dogs.



Vern, 24
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
Lived in the Philippines until he was ten years old.

JC

For a while there, I mean, for a good eight years/ten years, I was like "medical school, medical school." You know what I mean, like, "I'm going to be a great doctor." And I think I would be. I think I would be a great doctor but maybe it's not for me.

I wish I had figured this out before I had gotten out of college. Maybe there was something else out there and I was so focused on med school that I lost opportunities. I guess, maybe when we were all in college, we were so focused on one thing - one career - maybe none of us looked around...And you always have those friends who are free and don't really have - I mean, they have agendas but you always thought they were flighty. Those are the people who are happy now - the people with the jobs that are happy. 'Cause all my friends that were like, "I'm doing this. I'm doing this." They're like, "I'm quitting." And you're twenty-four/twenty-five and you're totally lost. But when the others were eighteen/nineteen and they were lost, it was no big deal because they were eighteen or nineteen.

What if I don't figure out what I want to do in five years? What if I'm going to be thirty-years old and after that, if I were to go into higher education, in like five years I'd be like forty/fifty-years old by the time I get out and everybody else I know will be retiring with grandkids and I'll be like, "Yeah, I'm just starting my life!"



JC, 24
Chicago, Illinois

Megan

Actually, this past weekend, I had a huge wake up call. I was visiting my boyfriend in Portland and I told him, "You know, I'm not satisfied right now. You know what I want to do? I want to be a waitress. I want to give up my position and my title, wearing suits and going to workshops and doing all that. I want to give that up for simplicity." And I starting thinking about it and when I thought who I was letting down it would be my parents.

I've decided that when I'm forty and I look back, "What did I do when I was twenty-one? My God, I had this horrible job and I sat behind a desk and was so worried about my title that I didn't enjoy life." I don't want to do that. I want to say, "Hey, you know what I want to be? A waitress. And I did it and I loved it and I met great people and I had the time of my life."

I want to experiment. For once I'm following my heart and it feels right. I can think of all the jobs I had and the best job I ever had was working at a coffee drive-thru because I met so many incredible people - people that I'll remember 'til I'm ninety. The customers became like family to me. They would see me when I broke up with a boyfriend. I would know their kids' names, their dogs' names and hear their heartaches of the day, and it became my own little world. I just loved the personal connection I had with each and every one of them. I loved it.



Megan, 21
Bend, Oregon

Zeb

I want to be in the Forestry. Want to be a fire fighter. Have to go through some training but I'll just be a ground pounder - cutting down brush and stuff. I'd like to do it long-term but I doubt it will last. I get bored of work. I got to change jobs all the time. I don't like to be bored. That's probably why I drink beer - so I'm not bored - 'cause after a while you got to go to sleep again. I stop drinking sometimes but not that long. I don't talk that much when I'm not drinking. Yeah, that's why I drink probably - to feel comfortable again.

If I have kids I probably wouldn't drink so much. I think it's the burden of having them weighing me down so I'd slow down. You can't be all slobbered tickling your kids. You got to be sober. They'd make me do the right thing too - like put more goals in my head. Marriage is a little harder thing. Got to live with her for at least two years. Oh yeah, why would you want to marry someone if you are going to divorce them a year later? I want true love for marriage but kids - kids - they're cool. I had a little theory but my friend said it wouldn't work. You have so many kids that you can't pay for child support anymore and, if you can't, how are they going to make you pay? If you have, like, a hundred kids, how are you going to pay for them all? That would be cool though - make my family huge.



Zeb, 22
Willitts, California

Dena

I have terminal cancer. The first time I got diagnosed they gave me pretty good odds of surviving it. Two years ago it came back and I got all my treatments and went back to work and thought everything was cool. Then I started not feeling good again and so I went back to the doctor and they did some tests and found out it metastasized into my bones. And at that point they were like, "You know, there's really not much we can do. We can do some chemo and stall it off but, pretty much, your max is like five years." So I was like, "Okay."

I live for the now, the simple things. You hear a lot of people with cancer talk about it but the birds chirp more and the sunsets are prettier and the flowers are more beautiful. I try to live for the now because there are so many beautiful things right now. And I can't worry about the past because, you know, it tore me up for a really long time. I mean, by the time I found my lump it was the size of a walnut. It's like, "Why didn't I find it sooner?" and you can't live like that because it just eats you up. And the future, if you start worrying about, "Well, when am I going to die?" then you might as well be dead. So I think that really helps a lot - not thinking about the past or not dealing with the future - because both of them are really out of your hands. [Except] I guess the future for my daughter. I guess I try and get a lot of things set up for her. I think a lot about her future.



Dena, 28
Pampa, Texas
Grew up: Wheat Ridge, Colorado